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Approaching the Cultural Diversity of Digital Worlds: Children's Literature in a "New Literacy" Perspective

First, I should like to say that the writing of this paper is supported by a research grant from the Danish Cultural Ministry's Research Council. It's part of a project trying to rethink the children's library functions from a 2.0 knowledge theoretical perspective running in 2008-2009. The project, among other things, focuses on the library as a discourse in search for a new foundation in the light of the changed constellation between book culture and digital culture.

The book is both a medium and a paradigm of child knowledge. As Carmen Luke, the Australian researcher in pedagogical sociology and communication, reminds us in her study *Pedagogy, Printing and Protestantism – the Discourse on Childhood*, the modern invention of childhood in 15th and 16th century Protestant Germany was highly and intricately connected to the invention of the printing press. Modern childhood after Luther was not least constructed as a "systematization of ... ideas in print". This childhood was, indeed, a "going by the book" or, in other words, a bookspace that had profound effects. To quote Luke

"Print ... fixed the ideas about children previously encoded in behaviour – ways of doing things – into symbolic form which was further affixed to the material object of the book" (Luke 1989, p. 52)

In the present new millennium, it seems that children's literature studies has for long been seeking to transcend the modern bookspace that Luke describes. Discussions of children's literature as a mode of discourse, concerns about the

autonomization of children's culture, advocacies for a global, so-called "planetary" critical-semiotic research community or pleas for transcending the notions of traditional academia all seem to be addressing different aspects in a major shift from printed text to digital textuality. There is perhaps a need for "new" children's literature studies to relate itself more constructively and critically to the term of "digital humanities", a field seeking to combine theory and technology in a non-determinist and non-fetichist way and to map out the possible contours of a transdisciplinary field of signification.

A philosophy of digital humanities seen through the lens of writing could be very important. In his study of hypertext, George P. Landow reminds us that there is a striking parallelism between poststructuralism and the modes of digital media. By analogy, much children's literature research has become concerned with deconstructing fictional constructs disguised as givens, or with the possibility of fiction being in itself a product of written culture, as argued by Bo Steffensen, the Danish researcher in literary pedagogy (TJEK, EVT. UDDYBE). Concurrently, canonicity, as an institutional output of bookspace, has long been studied as a multiplicity of different canons, indeed as a product of a power-knowledge discourse based on an axiology of dispersion rather than on print culture's notions of scarcity. Moreover, much children's literature research of today is increasingly concerned with studying children's literature not as a product but as a process of exchanges by which a given text is translated to new audiences, new media, and new meanings. Understanding children's literature has become a question of understanding the gaps, interstices and interrelations that carry the notion of culture, or rather a notion of culture along the Foucault-Derrida axis of form and play, materialism and linguistics.

From even a moderate medium theory perspective, the digital evolution/revolution could be expected to affect the paradigmatic, ontological and epistemological “mindset” of researchers, who would presumably be among the first to seek to accommodate their hunches, insights and perspectives to the new affordances of multimodal digital texts. I have already briefly mentioned a major shift from product to processes, which could also be translated into a shift from literature to literacy. Recently, the field of “new literacy” research has attempted to move literacy studies into a transdisciplinary direction but how does this relate to children’s literature in a digital context, we might ask?

II

Transdisciplinary research is often foregrounded as a possible answer to the challenges posed by the transition from a previously dominant bookspace to the cultural diversity of digital space. To quote Len Unsworth’s new literacy perspective, transdisciplinary research transcends bookspace by reorganising knowledge not along the metaphor of collection or curriculum but in a more “integrative”, or, one might add, “ecological” or rhizome-like way.

Transdisciplinary research transcends the knowledge of the disciplines while trying to establish a new integrated focus. In Unsworth’s view, there’s a need to develop a metalanguage for multimodality (EVT. CITAT REINVENTING KNOWLEDGE):

“Transdisciplinary research ... is very different from “inter-“ or “multidisciplinary” research. The latter imply that one still pursues research focused within the disciplines while building bridges between them and/or assembling the research efforts into a “collection”, whereas the real alternative is to transcend disciplinary boundaries to achieve the kind of integrated focus

necessary to research issues in the fields such as new literacies research. This means that ... researchers need to commit to reading and participating in the discourses of research beyond the discipline(s) in which they were trained and in which their prestige is established.”

(Len Unsworth: “Metaliteracies and Metalanguage: Describing Image/Text Relations as a Resource for Negotiating Multimodal Texts”, 2008, s. 379)

It should be emphasized that children’s literature studies is sorely needed as a perspective in new literacy research. What often happens in both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies is that the new field is often established along research strategical or political lines rather than along knowledge theoretical lines. An example is childhood studies, which in many countries has tended to become a purely sociological branch of research rather than a truly transdisciplinary field reflecting the theoretical progression of knowledge in *all* relevant fields. In these processes, the sociological perspective tends to push the aesthetic concept of knowledge much more to the margin than, for instance, postmodern or post-structuralist theories of knowledge and creativity would tend to prescribe.

Periods of major transition are, as Julia Kristeva reminds us, often accompanied by major battles of the sign (EVT. CITAT KRISTEVA). To finish our comments on Len Unsworth’s concept of a metalanguage that would make possible a research focus on intermediality and multimodality also including children’s literature, it is clear that his theoretical framework is social semiotic rather than knowledge theoretical. If post-structuralism is a philosophy of the digital seen through the lens of writing, this social semiotic basis would seem to weaken the focus on the play of the signifier along the Foucault-Derrida axis that has been foregrounded as a promise for children’s literature studies. As

Perry Nodelman argues in *Words About Pictures*, it may certainly be fruitful to examine “the possibility of a system underlying visual communication that is something like a grammar – something like the system of relationships and contexts that makes verbal communication possible”. In later works, however, Nodelman explicitly sets the agenda for a view of poststructuralism as a theoretically refracted “metalanguage” of children’s literature, encompassing not only socialisation but also the “playful” view of language that is a philosophical line from, for instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics to Derrida’s deconstruction (EVT. CITAT DERRIDA, SE PH.D.).

Poststructuralist theories of the sign view knowledge as unstable, fragmented, process-oriented, and as releasing multiple meaning in the linguistic space between socialisation and play. It is a challenge to include the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy and literary studies in digital humanities to make it a truly emancipatory discourse, also reflecting the promise of writing.

Performance embedded in discursive systems is certainly socially situated but it is also a play with the other, as any writer would know. To quote Nodelman’s research policy statement for children’s literature studies, there is a need to emphasize the play of the signifier more in the linguistic turn towards literature as a knowledge media:

“It is ... clear... that the kinds of reading privileged by cultural studies approaches and their focus on matters of race, class and gender have a tendency to bypass the significance of the specific form and language of texts. “If I have an anxiety about English studies in the postmodern condition”, says Catherine Belsey, “it is that we have neglected the signifier. There is, perhaps, a tendency for current readings to go straight for the signified, to uncover the thematic content of the text, whether conscious or unconscious, and ignore the mode of address.”

(Nodelman 2005, p. 8-9)

The linguistic turn could, indeed, be interpreted as an increased focus on the material aspects of writing, which was perhaps also what Mitzi Myers had in mind when arguing that there is a need for “a return to textual criticism with more attention paid to the materiality of a work. Mitzi consistently urged more attention to “rips, dirt, spills, uncensored comments, drawings and scribbles, rude jokes and missing pages – in these ‘defacements’ we discover the hidden history of childhood” (Adams & Ruwe 2005, p. 232). To conclude my brief problematization, new literacy studies, in order to understand the new integrative quality of modes that also include writing, would need a theory of the knowledge of writing, which not least poststructuralism provides. Knowledge production and literacy could perhaps then be addressed not simply as “construction” but also as a mediation of language as the space of the other. In the German-Danish pedagogical thinker Feiwe Kupferberg’s words on creativity, “A socio-cultural theory of creativity combines a micro-sociological phenomenological theory of knowledge (the “sociology of knowledge”) which emphasizes the situational contexts of learning and knowledge, with a semiotic theory where the focus is rather upon language and media as independent sources of thinking.” (Kupferberg 2009).

But what could the possible benefits from a collaboration between children’s literature studies and “new literacy” research be?

III

In *Keywords* Raymond Williams reminds us that the definition of literature as potentially canonical and the separation of literature from literacy was primarily a product of the 20th century. As already mentioned, it could be

argued that children's literature studies after post-structuralism is a linguistic turn that seems highly congenial with a move from literature to literacy. Due to the progressive quality of knowledge, this move can, importantly, not be made as a simple return to earlier non-theoretical positions. The separation between literature and literacy was perhaps aided by divisions between academia and the "book people" agents of children's literature. Writing is a medium whose print versions affords notions of the canonical as a reflection of scarcity but it is also a knowledge medium. Studying the interface between the so-called WReader and the increasingly dispersed text formats of today could lead us to more sophisticated understandings of the concept of knowledge media and of how knowledge production changes historically at the informal level.

To quote Margaret Mackey, in the new media age new "ecologies of attention" arise. Fan fiction is an example of a new literacy combining "new technical stuff" with "new ethos stuff". According to Michelle Knobel and Colin Lankshear, two very active proponents of new literacy, a new mindset or knowledge regime is emerging. Apparently, this new mindset is the exact opposite of the characteristics of print culture in the Gutenberg galaxy. It should be added that medium theory's and, indeed, new literacy's image of typographic culture is perhaps a too binary construction (it would be great to have children's book historians examine this!). On a first glimpse, however, the dominant features of digital culture are apparently quite opposite to bookspace, inasmuch as these features are, for instance, informal construction and sharing of knowledge, metareflection, "sampling", "remixing", collective intelligence and distributed expertise. To quote Knobel & Lankshear:

"[T]he more a literacy practice privileges participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralized expertise, collective intelligence over

individual possessive intelligence, collaboration over individuated authorship, dispersion over scarcity, experimentation over ‘normalization’, innovation and evolution over stability and fixity, creative-innovative rule breaking over generic purity and policing, Phase 2 automation over Phase 1 automation, relationship over information broadcast, (...) the more we should regard is as a ‘new’ literacy.”

(Knobel & Lankshear 2006, p. 60)

It could be of paramount importance for children’s literature studies to introduce a more sophisticated and theoretical understanding of the medium of writing into new literacy research, both historically and in relation to the new media formats, not leaving the reader with all too easy, for instance determinist, generalisations of “print literacy”. This would perhaps entail a more pronounced focus on the book as a medium and on language as a play between signifier and signified where knowledge is created as play with form. This said, it seems a very promising ambition in “new literacy” studies to try to overcome the 20th century division of labour between traditional academia and the so-called “applications”, a division still structuring for instance Peter Hunt’s *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature*.

Approaching children’s literature as a knowledge medium would be a promising development for children’s literature studies. As Perry Nodelman reminds us, it is not least the intermedial tension in the picturebook that also creates a cognitive tension that could be related to creativity and knowledge construction. The picturebook, of course, combines the verbal text with the image, the linearity of writing with the “moment” and deixis of the image. As Nodelman writes:

“The excitement of a good picture book is the constant tension between the moments isolated by the pictures and the flow of words that join these moments together. The jumpy rhythm of picture books is quite different from the gradually intensifying flow of stories told by words themselves.”
(Nodelman 1984, p. 8)

The workings of the iconotext are in some respects related to the function of the metaphor. If it is correct, as Mark Turner would have it, that the metaphor is a central vehicle in the questioning of established knowledge and the creation of new knowledge, the picturebook could, indeed, be reconceived as a central knowledge medium. Generally, the field of intermediality seems particularly promising for understanding the concept of knowledge media and, indeed, of knowledge itself. Examining the relation between verbal and pictorial modes (and, in the case of children’s literature, also orality) could lead to more developed understandings of both the reading of printed texts and of digital computer literacy. With digital technology, of course, there has been a development from serial decoding of print to a more complicated or integrated parallel decoding of multimodal information (in the field of “new literacy”, sensory modes such as colour and sound are increasingly being theorised, which for instance is the case in Jewitt Carey’s work). In the present convergence culture, multimodality is both a feature of digital and print textuality and therefore it should also be a concern in children’s literature studies. To quote Len Unsworth:

“While the multimodal nature of electronic texts and Internet communication has drawn attention to the blurring of relations between verbal and visual media of textuality (...), this changed visual/verbal dynamic has also emerged as a key issue in the changing nature of text in books. Writing about *Books for Youth in*

a Digital Age, Dresang (1999) noted, “In the graphically oriented, digital, multimedia world, the distinction between pictures and words has become less and less certain” (p. 21), and that “in order to understand the role of print in the digital age, it is essential to have a solid grasp of the growing integrative relationship of print and graphics.” (p. 22) ”.

(Unsworth 2008, p. 384)

With this new integrative relationship, new research questions should be asked. Is e-literature, for instance, still literature in terms of the changed symbolic interaction afforded by this new integrative relation between print and digital media? In *E-Literature for Children – Enhancing Digital Literacy Learning*, one of the first introductions to e-literature, Len Unsworth lists three types of e-literature for children: “The main categories of articulation are electronically *augmented*, electronically *re-contextualized*, or electronically *originated* literary texts” (Unsworth 2006, p. xvii). What are the differences between these types in terms of their being literary texts or something entirely new or different? In Unsworth’s opinion it might be fruitful to develop a common theoretical framework encompassing social semiotics, children’s literature studies, and the equally well-established research on visual “grammar” (for instance developed by Gunther Kress on the basis of Halliday’s social semiotics, which has lent itself particularly well to extending linguistics into visual culture). In my own conclusion, there is a need to have children’s literature studies and “new literacy” research problematize each other even more fundamentally. It could be done by developing the concept of knowledge media in a truly transdisciplinary framework, which should, of course, be a collective enterprise reflecting the new modes and mindset of knowledge production. Some important questions to ask in relation to children’s literature would, in my opinion, be the following:

- **What are knowledge media for children in a transdisciplinary empirical-theoretical perspective? What particular view of reflexivity is embedded in the concept of media being seen as knowledge media?**
- **Knowledge media and learning, knowledge media and literacy: What is the role and function of children's literature, alone or in an integrated relation to other media, in the acquisition of knowledge in informal and formal processes of learning? Does the reading of print change in the light of new ecologies of reading and attention? How is children's literature read, produced and perhaps transformed in fan fiction rewritings of the canon?**
- **Knowledge and the convergence of media: What are the implications for production, distribution, access to, and sharing of knowledge of today's media being organised as dialogic network media? What kinds of knowledge are "afforded" by specific media?**
- **How important is the materiality or "storing capacity" of specific media for the production of knowledge?**
- **Knowledge and cultural experience: Media also communicate understandings of cultural artefacts, aesthetic products, canonical texts and artistic works. How is children's literature transformed in the new media formats and circuits?**